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Human Monogamy: Innate Tendency or Personal Preference

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Abstract

Successful monogamous relationships may come as second nature to some. For others, remaining emotionally and sexually exclusive with their partner is difficult, leaving individuals to question whether monogamy is a natural human instinct. This paper evaluates research fortifying monogamy as an inborn tendency and research reinforcing the notion that exclusive dyadic relationships are a socialized personal preference. Monogamy is supported through survival instinct, procreation, and pair bonding. Humanity as a non-monogamous species is supported through infidelity threats, jealous tendencies, sexual fulfillment, and the potential mating candidates of the modern world. After assessing both sides, the author makes an informed stance on the debate.

Keywords: monogamy, human sexuality, biological socialization

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Human Monogamy:
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Many couples throughout history have aimed to achieve and maintain successful monogamy in their relationships, but these efforts may be in vain (Rathus et al., 2020). Monogamous relationships, defined by emotional and sexual exclusivity, might not be a natural human instinct (Rathus et al., 2020). While copious evidence supports human monogamy, there is conflicting research to support non-monogamy as the driving force (e.g., Knopp et al., 2017; Lee & O'Sullivan, 2019; Lopes et al., 2017; Mogilski et al., 2019). As a result of these opposing concepts, a question arises: Is monogamy a human instinct or a personal preference within a non-monogamous species? There are a variety of traits, abilities, and behaviours that contribute to the belief that dyadic relationships are inborn tendencies (Algoe et al., 2017; Horwitz et al., 2016; Lopes et al., 2017; Mogilski et al., 2019; Rathus et al., 2020). The propensity towards survival, reproduction, and pair bonding represents evolutionary and biological adaptations that may have led to human monogamy (Algoe et al., 2017; Horwitz et al., 2016; Lopes et al., 2017; Mogilski et al., 2019; Rathus et al., 2020). However, the modern world is constantly developing and forcing humanity to adapt and evolve in different ways. Since the contemporary era reduces humankind's need for characteristics that once helped ancestral humans thrive, natural tendencies and perspectives toward monogamy may be shifting (Lee & O'Sullivan, 2019; Vossler & Moller, 2020). Mating behaviours no longer focus solely on basic human needs (Rathus et al., 2020). Thus, infidelity, jealousy, sexual fulfillment, and an abundance of mating candidates all contribute to the possibility that monogamy may not be a natural human tendency (Costa et al., 2019; Knopp et al., 2017; Lee & Sullivan, 2019; Mogilski et al., 2019; Rathus et al., 2020; Vossler & Moller, 2020). These psychological and sociocultural variables within human culture have impacted the framework of human sexuality (Rathus et al., 2020). An illustration of this change is the diverse forms of relationships within consensual non-monogamy (CNM), such as polyamory, swinging, and "open" relationships (Mogilski et al., 2019; Rathus et al., 2020). Evaluations of various biological, psychological, and social mechanisms within human sexuality are required to determine which is the innate construct: monogamy or non-monogamy.

Natural Monogamy

Survival Instinct

Humankind's inclination toward self-preservation has fostered monogamy throughout millennia (Rathus et al., 2020). Historically, creating stable dyadic relationships may have been detrimental to individual and neonatal survival (Rathus et al., 2020). In ancestorial humans, threats of jealousy amplified female relationship investment and male refusal to raise other men's children (Mogilski et al., 2019). During these times, human existence was constantly battling for survival, and raising children in a secure partnership provided a variety of survival benefits (Mogilski et al., 2019). Monogamy has also served as a basis for survival in more recent history (Rathus et al., 2020). In numerous eras, including the Ancient Hebrews, Greeks, and Romans, infidelity was a crime punishable by death or other harsh penalties that made survival unlikely (Rathus et al., 2020). Such threats to survival may have facilitated monogamy to imbed within humanity throughout the centuries. This persistent drive towards staying alive highlights monogamous processes that have been passed down through genetic heritage (Mogilski et al., 2019). Self-preservation contributions to monogamy prevail in the present day (Lopes et al., 2017). For example, recent research suggests that mate-retention behaviours in modern-day relationships have a positive association with different existence values, such as survival (Lopes et al., 2017). Throughout human history, people have developed an evolutionary reliance on monogamy as an inborn trait necessary for survival (Lopes et al., 2017; Mogilski et al., 2019; Rathus et al., 2020).

Procreation in Families

Traditional family structure requires two elements: a monogamous dyad and reproduction (Rathus et al., 2020). As previously noted, monogamous households have been the societal norm in many eras. Evolutionary theory states that humans have developed certain genetic predispositions to procreate and avoid extinction: attraction to mating characteristics, engaging in long-term mating strategies, and pursuing a stable environment for offspring (Rathus et al., 2020). These ingrained processes encourage reproduction and monogamy maintenance within dyadic relationships (Mogilski et al., 2019; Rathus et al., 2020). Finding a partner and creating a life together are essential steps to creating these classic family norms. Individuals intending to start a family often gravitate towards the perceived emotional benefits of a monogamous relationship over the perceived uncertainty that coincides with CNM (Mogilski et al., 2019). As such, the conceptual framework of a mother and father coming together to procreate and build a stable

family structure is a common practice that supports natural human monogamy (Rathus et al., 2020).

Pair Bonding

Pair bonding—strong attachments between two individuals—is shaped by hormonal and cognitive factors (Algoe et al., 2017; Horwitz et al., 2016). A predominant hormone in the development of human attachments, romantic or otherwise, is oxytocin (Algoe et al., 2017). Oxytocin encourages romantic bonds between partners by increasing their feelings of devotion and affection (Algoe et al., 2017). This hormonal influence unconsciously drives humanity toward monogamous behaviours in dyadic relationships (Algoe et al., 2017; Rathus et al., 2020). Additionally, these bonds can be impacted by the attachment style developed early in an individual's life (Horwitz et al., 2016). Social variables developed from attachment styles contribute to the influence of pair bonding on mate selection (Horwitz et al., 2016). As a result, individual attachment styles impact the quality of pair bonds and an individual's choice of whom to form these connections with (Horwitz et al., 2016). The biological and psychosocial contributions toward creating pair bonds highlight a natural dedication toward monogamy.

Natural Nonmonogamy

Infidelity Threats

A major contributor to the support of non-monogamy is the capacity for infidelity (Rathus et al., 2020). If humans were naturally monogamous, individuals would not seek or desire to stray from the confines of their relationship. Adultery, although hard to study due to self-preservation, seems to be increasing in regularity and is detrimental to a healthy relationship (Rathus et al., 2020). This breach of trust is a violation of the psychological contract partners enter when starting a monogamous relationship (Rathus et al., 2020). The tendency for humans to stray and detract from their dyadic relationships supports the notion that humans may be more prone to nonmonogamy. A study by Lee and O'Sullivan (2019) found that taking actions towards maintaining monogamy does not predict a person's ability to stay emotionally or sexually committed to their partner. If humanity is naturally ingrained toward monogamy, why do individuals struggle to meet the basic requirements? Allowing the exploration of sexual behaviours and interests outside of a primary relationship creates more opportunities for the dyad to prosper without the threat of adultery (Mogilski et al., 2019; Rathus et al., 2020). Dishonesty and infidelity can be decreased when partners consent to having relations outside of a dyadic pairing (Mogilski

et al., 2019). Increasing acceptance of non-monogamy may decrease break-up rates due to extradyadic affairs. Arguments to justify cheating, such as a momentary lapse in judgment or a one-time mistake, might be faulty cognition. Specifically, Knopp et al. (2017) found that people who have previously engaged in cheating are three times more likely to repeat this behaviour in later relationships. Thus, humankind's inability to achieve the only requirement of monogamy suggests that behavioural processes, such as infidelity, are detrimental in the argument towards human non-monogamy (Knopp et al., 2017; Mogilski et al., 2019; Rathus et al., 2020).

Jealous Tendencies

In the absence of infidelity, the cognitive ability to feel jealousy refutes monogamous instinct (Mogilski et al., 2019; Rathus et al., 2020). Jealousy can strike in a variety of settings and is not uncommon in dyadic relationships. The emotion is found throughout every culture and has a myriad of negative consequences, such as insecurity, anxiety, and mistrust (Rathus et al., 2020). A person's inclination towards jealousy can pose a threat to their relationship and self-concept (Mogilski et al., 2019). In CNM relationships, jealousy may be less destructive and require fewer cognitive resources to overcome. Mogilski et al. (2019) found that people engaging in CNM relationships are less likely than their monogamous counterparts to suffer from emotional jealousy or feel distressed when jealous thoughts prevail. However, the assumption that individuals in CNM relationships are never exposed to jealousy is incorrect (Rathus et al., 2020). In fact, people in CNM relationships exhibit more cognitive jealousy, deliberating and evaluating their partners' potential to stray, but are more transparent and truthful about any external sexual experiences (Mogilski et al., 2019). When standards for an extradyadic relationship have been set, the potential for jealousy to transpire may be reduced. This reduction, or potential elimination, of jealousy aids in the removal of everyday threats monogamous relationships may face (Rathus et al., 2020). Therefore, having a tendency towards non-monogamy minimizes cognitive restraints set by jealousy and fosters healthier relationships (Mogilski et al., 2019; Rathus et al., 2020).

Sexual Fulfillment

Monogamous relationships, with a strong sense of trust and faithfulness, can still face challenges in sexual fulfilment (Mogilski et al., 2019; Rathus et al., 2020). Individual sexual desires have the potential to be satisfied within a monogamous relationship, but CNM allows for a greater range and ability to meet their needs (Mogilski et al., 2019). Erotic plasticity, changes in an individual's sex drive caused by sociocultural factors, continuously varies due to age and gender

(Rathus et al., 2020). Constant shifts in sexual libidos and the imbalance of personal desires may lead to unhappiness and dissatisfaction in relationships. A study by Costa et al. (2019) revealed that women's testosterone levels throughout reproductive and menopausal years change often and contribute to different degrees of sexual desire. In a species that has such variety in sex drives, extradyadic relationships may help individuals reach their needs and minimize challenges brought on by unequal libidos. Specifically, CNM allows individuals to express their sexual desires through numerous outlets (Mogilski et al., 2019; Rathus et al., 2020). For example, Mogilski et al. (2019) found that engaging in an extradyadic relationship with consent can increase sexual satisfaction by fulfilling a partner's sexual desire. A species that was monogamous by nature would have similar or equal sex drives, but as evidence suggests, the variations caused by biological and sociocultural factors support non-monogamy being essential for sexual fulfillment (Costa et al., 2019; Mogilski et al., 2019; Rathus et al., 2020).

Social Creatures in the Modern World

At the most basic level, humans are naturally social creatures. The human desire to live and interact with others is increasingly important as the world population expands (Lee & O'Sullivan, 2019; Rathus et al., 2020). This rise in population equates to a constant increase in potential mating candidates, which, in turn, produces more opportunities to detract from monogamous relationships (Lee & O'Sullivan, 2019; Vossler & Moller, 2020). The resulting expansion of social circles makes an individual's attempts to stay monogamous increasingly difficult, especially in situations of mutual attraction (Lee & O'Sullivan, 2019). As the world's population continues to inflate, it can only be assumed that these issues will persist and challenge the concept of natural monogamy. Modern-day technology, especially the Internet, facilitates the expansion of social networks (Vossler & Moller, 2020). The Internet generates and encourages opportunities for cheating in a multitude of ways, even when a partner is not attempting to be unfaithful, by allowing for false personas, anonymity, and convenient accessibility (Vossler & Moller, 2020). In today's world, the belief that everyone is driven towards practicing monogamy may be a faulty assumption. The ability and willingness to be open to potential candidates outside of dyadic relationships could contribute to humans' tendency towards non-monogamy.

Conclusion

The complexity of human sexuality provides evidence for both monogamy and non-monogamy to be the natural human tendency. Humans are a dynamic, multifaceted species that

have multiple layers to their being. When considering several biopsychosocial factors, the notion that humans are ingrained to find and mate exclusively with one other person seems somewhat unrealistic. It takes effort, strength, and ongoing commitment for someone to stay monogamous in their relationship (Rathus et al., 2020). If humans were naturally monogamous, maintenance would not be so difficult to achieve. Although there is evidence to suggest monogamy has evolved within humanity over time, a developing emphasis on equality and sexual choice has decreased the need for such adaptations (e.g., Knopp et al., 2017; Lee & O'Sullivan, 2019; Lopes et al., 2017; Mogilski et al., 2019). Staying faithful in a relationship is no longer essential for existence in contemporary times (Mogilski et al., 2019). In modern society, human sexuality ceases to be primarily focused on survival or reproductive characteristics and gravitates toward sexual preferences and freedoms (Rathus et al., 2020). Even if monogamy managed to become innate to humankind, the potential instinct seems to have gone dormant. Regardless of this possibility, the evidence for natural non-monogamy is compelling. Sexual and romantic relationships are evolving into more fluid concepts that no longer need monogamy to succeed (Mogilski et al., 2019; Rathus et al., 2020). Individuals may form attachments to a partner while engaging in consensual extradyadic relationships to create healthier, more satisfying connections (Mogilski et al., 2019). As it seems, instead of being a natural human tendency, modern-day monogamy has become an option that innately non-monogamous individuals can choose to engage in.

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